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SIPDIS

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TAGS: PHUM KIRF SOCI PGOV VM ETMIN HUMANR RELFREE

SUBJECT: Religion in Lao Cai and Yen Bai - Different Stories

Ref: A. 02 Hanoi 2628 B. Hanoi 0551

- C. Hanoi 566 D. Hanoi 073

1. (U) Summary: Local officials in two mountainous, predominantly minority northwestern provinces appear to be taking differing approaches towards religion. Lao Cai officials talked a cautious and rigid line while trying to explain how they have supported religious practice within legal guidelines. They refused to acknowledge even the existence of Protestantism in Lao Cai. Yen Bai authorities highlighted the increase in the province's (still small) number of Catholics and Buddhists, and expressed a live-and-let-live attitude towards ethnic minority Protestants. Septel will cover ethnic minority affairs in the two provinces. End Summary.

2. (U) Poloff and Pol FSN met with the Acting Director Xan Quang of the Lao Cai Department Religious Affairs on February 19, with a TV cameraman present. Quang, making frequent references to "great national unity," read a doctrinaire explanation of the CPV's policy on religion and its implementation through the GVN's Decree 26 of 1999. Stressing the "favorable conditions" for religion provided by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and the GVN, he outlined the development of religious practice in Lao Cai for Catholic and Buddhist believers.

Catholics in Lao Cai -----

3. (U) Lao Cai's 10-12,000 Catholics are under Hung Hoa Diocese, headquartered in Ha Tay province. There are two parish churches, one in Lao Cai town, the other in Sapa town, as well as five Catholic chapels. Members of the Hmong minority worship at two of the chapels, while the other congregations are almost entirely ethnic majority Kinh. There are no priests assigned to Lao Cai, but a diocesan "vicar" visits five times a year, spending about 100 days in the province.

4. (U) Quang, several other officials, and the TV cameraman escorted poloffs to Lao Cai town's Coc Leo Catholic Church. A Catholic worker ("tu sy," a term used in Catholic circles apparently to describe seminary graduates who have not yet been ordained) is resident at the church. Provincial officials claimed that the Chinese had destroyed the original Catholic church in Lao Cai during the 1979 border fighting. The current large concrete cruciform structure rising prominently near the Red River was built between 1999-2002. There are three services each Saturday and Sunday, with over 1000 people attending on a weekly basis. The Catholic worker conducts some religious education classes, but most are taught by specially trained laypersons who are "recognized" by provincial authorities. Provincial officials expressed confidence that there would "soon" be a priest in Lao Cai, probably at Coc Leo Church, but claimed the final decision depended on the bishop.

No Protestants in Lao Cai -----

5. (U) Quang did not mention Protestants at all in his prepared statement. In response to questions, he claimed that he had not been notified that the GVN-recognized Evangelical Church of Vietnam-North (ECVN) had enrolled any Lai Cai-based Protestant congregations (ref a). He further claimed that he had heard "nothing" about Protestants in the province. When asked if it was legal to possess a Bible, Quang answered that this would be decided according to specific case-by-case circumstances, based on the policy of the CPV and the GVN. However, all "officially published documents" were permissible, including Bibles published by the GVN's Religious Publishing House, he clarified.

6. (U) Poloff expressed concern over numerous reports of problems Hmong Protestants in Lao Cai's Bao Thang district were experiencing in trying peacefully to practice their faith (ref b provides details on allegations of attempts at forced renunciation in several districts in Lao Cai). Poloff emphasized that such reports were publicized overseas and would hurt Vietnam's international image. Poloff assured Quang and his colleagues that there was no American plot to divide Vietnam and that US policy supports the

territorial integrity of Vietnam. He urged officials to allow Protestants to practice their religion peacefully without interference. Poloff asked Quang to comment on these reports, but Quang only replied that he had no "formal documentation" about such reports and categorically refused to comment further. He assured Poloff that he knew Protestantism was not an "American" religion and added that it was actually a "good" religion.

A Few Buddhists -----

17. (U) Quang said that there were "a few thousand" Buddhists and one pagoda in Lao Cai, but no monks. In principle, he explained, there was no problem with assigning a monk to the pagoda, but there had been no formal request yet. He said that monks come from Quan Su Pagoda in Hanoi once or twice a year to perform ceremonies. (An official at Quan Su Pagoda later confirmed this.)

18. (U) Poloffs visited Cam Lo Pagoda in an agricultural village near Cam Duong town about 15 km outside Lao Cai town. About a dozen people, mostly women, were at the pagoda praying, while others were preparing decorations. A pagoda attendant confirmed that monks come from Hanoi to perform ceremonies during some important holidays such as the Buddha's birthday. She indicated that these requests were made on an ad hoc basis rather than as part of an annual plan submitted to provincial authorities. Like Coc Leo Church, Cam Lo Pagoda was said to have been destroyed during the 1979 Chinese invasion. The pagoda was rebuilt around 1990 on the site of the original structure. Much of the pagoda's financial support was apparently local, but a large portion of the pagoda's publicly listed donors showed residences elsewhere in Vietnam. In addition to the pagoda, there are Buddhist shrines in at least some of the temples for other traditional religions in Lao Cai.

Traditional Temples -----

19. (U) In response to Embassy's overall request to visit various religious establishments in Lao Cai, Quang also took poloffs to a large traditional complex dedicated to 16th century general Tran Hung Dao, located directly across the Nanxi river from China. Except for a huge banyan tree, several steles and some furnishings, the temple was entirely rebuilt after the 1979 border conflict. Poloffs had visited the temple on their own the evening before; during both visits, a variety of people were participating in rituals in different parts of the temple. The temple's attendant claimed that a recent festival had attracted 160,000 people from all over Vietnam. There was still some evidence of a recent large gathering.

10. (U) Poloffs also visited two other local temples, including one dedicated to the traditional "motherhood goddess." This well-maintained temple in Lao Cai town is located on what looks like prime real estate next to the bridge over the Nanxi River dividing Vietnam and China. Even at 9:00 p.m., dozens of people were visiting the temple, including more than a dozen mostly young women participating in a ceremony presided over by two robed attendants to ask for the "help of ancestors in heaven." A number of people were also visiting the traditional temple next to Cam Lo Pagoda at the time poloffs visited.

Religion "Strongly Developing" in Yen Bai -----

11. (U) Yen Bai provincial Director of Religious Affairs Tran Duc Thang briefed poloffs on February 21 and later escorted them to the Catholic church in Yen Bai city. Thang made brief reference to CPV resolutions and Decree 26, emphasizing that the province did not discriminate on the basis of religion. He highlighted that Yen Bai officials only carried out their "state management tasks" and did not interfere in the internal affairs of religious groups. He explained that a People's Committee member and a member of the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF) in each local jurisdiction were responsible for religious affairs. The Yen Bai VFF had launched an "excellent movement" to mobilize Catholics; a Catholic farmers' group was particularly successful, Thang claimed.

Catholics in Yen Bai -----

12. (U) Thang said that only over six percent of the province's population was either Catholic or Buddhist. Since the province divided from Lao Cai in 1992, the number of Catholics had increased from 34,000 to 44,000. About 3,000 of the Catholics were Hmong. The 36 Catholic facilities in 1992 had grown to 69, and the 37 Catholic congregations to 85. There are five priests, two ordained in 2000, according to Director Thang. Three of the priests were not yet legally resident in the province. Two Yen Bai

students are now attending the Catholic seminary in Hanoi, he added. Thang claimed that there were over 20 nuns in Yen Bai, an increase from two in 1992. (Note: This claim is in marked contrast to the difficulties nuns face in receiving GVN recognition elsewhere in Vietnam -- see refs c and d. End note.) Each Catholic congregation received a priest three or four times a year, he asserted. The province also facilitated special requests by Yen Bai's priests and visits by priests from other provinces, he claimed. He cited the participation of 30 to 40 priests in two ceremonies in recent years at the Catholic church in Yen Bai town as well as the activities of the three non-resident priests.

13. (U) The priest at Yen Bai's Catholic church said that he was responsible for three of Yen Bai's districts as well as Yen Bai town and that another priest was responsible for the other four. He was assisted by a seminarian, scheduled to graduate in 2004. He admitted some difficulty communicating with the Hmong Catholics in his charge when he began working in Yen Bai in 1992 and noted that there were still no church documents available in the Hmong language. A priest at the Hung Hoa diocesan office later confirmed that, while there are two priests resident in Yen Bai, only one (not three) non-resident priest is currently working in the province. He said that one of the province's two seminarians is scheduled to graduate in June and that the diocese expects to assign him to Yen Bai, pending provincial government approval.

Buddhists in Yen Bai

14. (U) Thang claimed that the 1,000 Buddhists in Yen Bai in 1992 had now increased to 5,000. He said that "due to wars and disinterest" there were "almost no" Buddhist facilities in 1992, but that there were now nine. He added that the provincial administration had approved the assignment of monks and said that they would come "soon."

Protestants

15. (U) In response to questions, Thang said that the authorities were aware of several thousand Hmong Protestants in Yen Bai. He claimed that the Protestants did not know a great deal about their religion, but that they caused no problems and the authorities left them alone. Most of them were not actually from Yen Bai, but had migrated from other provinces such as Lao Cai, according to Thang.

16. (U) Poloff noted frequent reports in the international media about abuses of religious freedom in Vietnam, particularly of Protestants, which cause problems for Vietnam's image abroad. Reports do not seem to come from Yen Bai, however; poloff remarked that the authorities' stance of leaving the Hmong Protestants alone seems positive. He noted to Thang that such a hands off attitude would be a good example for other provinces to follow.

Comment

17. (U) Lao Cai and Yen Bai have grown apart in their attitude towards regulating religion since their split in 1992. While post has received many reports of religious freedom problems in Lao Cai, Embassy sources could not come up with any specific problems for Protestants in Yen Bai. Although Yen Bai's depiction of religion in the province appears to have been somewhat sugarcoated, the differences between the two provinces are nonetheless striking. These differences demonstrate the important influence of local officials on religious practice in Vietnam. Concerns about "national unity" -- real or imagined -- seem to be a major excuse in cracking down on religious freedom in Vietnam; such worries are likely felt more keenly in border provinces.

PORTER